

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BRITISH/ AMERICAN PHRASAL VERBS

Part I A—K

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The differences between British and American phrasal verbs are of many different kinds and types. This leads to confusion when writing textbooks and constructing tests for students whose native language is not English. Although some dictionaries and reference books purport to mark the differences, in fact only a small proportion of the total number of different phrasal verbs are so marked. The following study has been undertaken to provide a more complete guide to British/American phrasal verbs. The British forms are given the classification of Cowie and Mackin in *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English: Volume 1: Verbs with Prepositions and Particles*. The example sentences are also derived from Cowie and Mackin. The type categorization follows a revised classification of my previous paper,¹⁾ which divided the differences into semantic, syntactic, and particle and prepositional differences.

Type :

Semantic Differences :

1. SD1—same form in both but with category change
2. SD2—same form in both with null category change
3. SD3—same form in both but with opposite meaning

Syntactic Differences :

4. SyD1—singular/plural
5. SyD2—transitive/intransitive

6. SyD3-definite/indefinite

7. SyD4-object deletion

Particle and Prepositional Differences :

8. PPD1-simple replacement

9. PPD2-replacement+semantic change

10. PPD3-particle deletion

Verbal Differences :

11. VD1-normal PV in both has specialized form in one

12. VD2-verb has no counterpart in the other

13. VD3-PV that use different verbs in the expression

14. VD4-verb deletion

15. VD5-verb deletion in front of infinitive

16. U -unique to British English

17. IP -idiomatic phrase

18. IP/NC-idiomatic phrase with noun change

As all SyD and VD forms that are different are also SD1, the American SD1 forms are not given. For example, the British form 'act up' is given as the American form 'act', Type PPD3; but American English also has the SD1 form 'act up' meaning to behave in an annoying manner. In this article only the more specialized SD2 and SD3 differences are given. American U forms are also not given in this article. The American forms enclosed in parentheses are an attempt to give a close approximation of the same level of usage, but if there is really no equivalent, the American form is marked with an X. The idiomatic phrases include (IP) as given in Volume I of Cowie and Mackin. Those phrasal verbs which may possibly be found in American English but with limited use are marked with an asterisk.

British Form	Type	American Form
act up (A1)	PPD3	act
ex. (Br.) When the chaps tease her she doesn't know how to act up. (Am.)		act.
*back off (A1)	PPD2	back up

ex. (Br.) Do you mind backing off a bit, Sir, while we clear this wreck?

(Am.) backing up

balls up (B1i nom) SyD1 ball up

ex. (Br.) The public would laugh if someone ballsed up the Civil Service.

(Am.) balled up

bat around (A1nom) VD1 run around

ex. (Brf.) I've been batting around all morning and I'm exhausted.

(Am.) running around

be round at (A1 A3) PPD3 be at/come round to

ex. (Br.) He was round at my house all evening.

(Am.) was at

be away (A1) VD4 be put away

ex. (Br.) They're away in old shoe boxes in the attic.

(Am.) 're put away

be well away (A1) U (far gone)

ex. Dick arrived at the party early and was well away when we came.

*be beyond a joke (A2) IP be not a joke

ex. (Br.) This is beyond a joke. Open the door right now!

(Am.) not a joke.

*be down (A1) PPD1 be off

ex. (Br.) I've checked the till and we're still \$40 down.

(Am.) off.

be down from (A1A3) U (graduate from)

ex. (Br.) Their son is just down from Oxford.

be for it (A2) PPD3 be in for it

ex. (Br.) You're going to be for it when your father comes home!

(Am.) be in for it

be in the picture (A2) IP/NC be in the know

ex. (Br.) Now that I'm in the picture what can I do for you?

(Am.) in the know

be in for (A3) PPD3 be in

ex. (Br.) I'm in for the 100 metres.

(Am.) in the

*be in for (A3) VD1 put in for

ex. (Br.) He's in for an administrative post.

(Am.) has put in for

be off (A1) U (go bad)

ex. (Br.) This cheese is slightly off.

be on ice (A2) SD3

ex. (Br.) The plan for the new book is on ice. (deferred)

(Am.) is on ice. (assured)

be on to (A3) U (be in touch with)

ex. (Br.) I've just been on to the accounts people and they said "yes."

*be out (A1) IP be out like a light

ex. (Br.) The boxer was dead out.

(Am.) was out like a light.

*be past it (A2) IP be past one's prime

ew. (Br.) He was quite a lady's man but he's past it, I'm afraid.

(Am.) past his prime,

bed with (A2) SyD5 go to bed with

ex. (Br.) I haven't bedded with him, if that's what you mean.

(Am.) gone to bed with him,

bitch up B 1i) VD1 screw up

ex. (Br.) We had it finished and then he came in and bitched it all up.

(Am.) screwed it all up.

- blow up (B 1i) SyD2 blow up (at sb.)
 ex. (Br.) The new teacher blew me up for not answering his question.
 (Am.) blew up at me for
- bog up (B 1i) VD1 foul up
 ex. (Br.) We explained the procedure to her but she got it all bogged up.
 (Am.) fouled up.
- bombed up (A1 B 1i) U (loaded with bombs)
 ex. (Br.) Before take-off, the planes were bombed up.
- *bowl along (A1) VD1 speed along
 ex. (Br.) His car bowled along until it reached the village.
 (Am.) speeded along
- *brave it out (B 1ii) VD3 tough it out
 ex. (Br.) I know he's going to yell at me, so I just have to brave it out.
 (Am.) tough it out.
- bring on (B 1i pass) PPD1 bring along
 ex. (Br.) It's ok to train him hard but don't bring him on too quickly.
 (Am.) bring him along
- bring in 5 (B 1i pass) U (introduce)
 ex. (Br.) A back bencher is bringing in a new bill.
- bring to the boil (B2 pass) SyD3 bring to a boil
 ex. (Br.) Bring the water to the boil and put the rice in.
 (Am.) a boil
- bring under (B 1i pass) SyD4 bring under control
 ex. (Br.) The rioters were brought under by the police.
 (Am.) brought under control
- brown off (B 1ii pass) VD3 piss off
 ex. (Br.) The way he talks really browns people off.
 (Am.) pisses people off.

buck up2 (A1) VD1 hurry up

ex. (Br.) He'll have to buck up if he's going to catch that train.

(Am.) hurry up

buckle to (A3pass) U (unite)

ex. (Br.) Now that she's gone we'll have to buckle to and do it all ourselves.

bung up (B li pass) U (constipate sb.)

ex. (Br.) The school food bungs me up.

*burn up1 (A1) VD1 flare up

ex. (Br.) We threw a log on the fire and it burned up with a crackle.

(Am.) flared up

catch out (B lii pass) U (trip up)

ex. (Br.) He tried to catch me out with his smart questions.

catch up (B1) SyD2 catch up with sb.

ex. (Br.) I'll catch you up later.

(Am.) catch up with you.

*catch up on (A3) PPD1 catch up with

ex. (Br.) I think old age has caught up on me.

(Am..) with me.

centre in (A2 B2) PPD1 center on

ex. (Br.) My academic interests centre in linguistics.

(Am.) center on

change up (A1) PPD4 change

ex. (Br.) I grind the gears whenever I change up from second to third.

(Am.) change

chat up (B lipass) U (come on to)

ex. (Br.) Who was that girl I saw you chatting up in the cafe last evening?

chivvy along (B liipass) VD1 urge along

ex. (Br.) The soldiers were getting tired of being chivvied along by the corporal.

ex. (Br.) He has just come down from Oxford with a degree in History.

come in pat (A1) U X

ex. (Br.) Her sister came in pat with the answer, "She loves you!"

come on8 (A1) U (begin)

ex. (Br.) It came on to snow.

come to the boil (A2) SyD3 come to a boil

ex. (Br.) The teapot came to the boil.

(Am.) a

come up on (A1) U (win)

ex. (Br.) John's lucky. He's always coming up on the football pools.

contract out (A1A2pass) U (withdraw from)

ex. (Br.) I've decided to contract out of your scheme.

*cover in (B2) cover over

ex. (Br.) We decided to cover in the passage from the garage to the house.

(Am.) cover over

cover in/with shame (B2pass) PPD1 cover with shame

ex. (Br.) The young wife was covered in shame when her roast burned in the oven.

(Am.) covered with shame

crash about (A1) VD1 bang about

ex. (Br.) I wish you wouldn't crash about like that as soon as you get home.

(Am.) bang about

crisp up (A1B 1i pass) U (make crisp)

ex. (Br.) Crisp up these cornflakes in the oven.

crook up (A1B 1ipass) VD2 (break up)

ex. (Br.) The news of his mother's death crooked him up.

cry off (A1A2) U (withdraw)

ex. (Br.) He was tempted to cry off but his friends persuaded him to go.

- curl up² (A1B 1ii) VD1 throw up
 ex. (Br.) The way he fawns on her makes me want to curl up.
 (Am.) throw up.
- cut off with a shilling (B3) IP/NC cut off without a penny
 ex. (Br.) His father died and he was cut off with a shilling.
 (Am.) cut off without a penny.
- damp down (B 1i pass) U (dampen)
 ex. (Br.) The party spirit was damped down by the news of the defeat.
- damp off (B 1i pass) U X
 ex. (Br.) The cactus damped off because she gave it too much water.
- dash away a tear (B 1iii) VD1 brush away a tear
 ex. (Br.) The poem was so moving she dashed away a tear.
 (Am.) brushed away
- deceived in (B2 pass) U (disappointed in)
 ex. (Br.) I've been deceived in Smith. He has no staying power.
- disinclined (for) (B2pass) U (discline to do)
 ex. (Br.) I was disinclined for further argument.
- dispose of⁴ (A2) U (possess)
 ex. (Br.) The Russians disposed of enough strength to hold off the Germans.
- dive (one's hand) into (A2B2) VD1 put one's hand into
 ex. (Br.) He dived into his coat pocket to see if he stil had his wallet.
 (Am.) put his hand into
- do down (B 1ipass) U (knock)
 ex. (Br.) The ladies were catty and always doing each other down.
 (knocking each other)
- do out² (B 1ipass) VD1 clean out
 ex. (Br.) You must do out your desk drawer.
 (Am.) clean out

do to death (B2pass) VD1 put to death

ex. (Br.) The guards did the prisoners to death in the woods.

(Am.) put

doss down (A1) VD1 bed down

ex. (Br.) The tramp dossed down on the air vent.

(Am.) bedded down

drag up (B 1i pass) VD1 bring up

ex. (Br.) Children these days are being dragged up any old how.

(Am.) brought up

drive back on (B3 pass) U (force to use)

ex. (Br.) Having no cigarettes, I was driven back on my pipe.

ease down (A1) PPD1 ease off

ex. (Br.) There's a bridge ahead, you'd better ease down.

(Am.) ease off.

eat one's head off (B 1ii) IP eat oneself to death

ex. (Br.) At the birthday party everyone ate their heads off.

(Am.) ate themselves to death.

eff off (A1) (taboo) VD1 fuck off (taboo)

ex. (Br.) You'd better eff off if you don't want to get hurt.

(Am.) fuck off

fall about (laughing) (A1) U (crack up)

ex. (Br.) People fell about when he told them his favorite jokes.

fall between two stools (A2) IP X

ex. (Br.) The display falls between two stools of historical periods.

fall in3 (A1B1pass) U (expire)

ex. (Br.) The lease fell in and we were told to leave the apartment.

fall out (A1) VD1 turn out

ex. (Br.) I was pleased with the way things had fallen out.

(Am.) turned out.

it fall out that (A1) IP come about

ex. (Br.) How did it fall out that they both were asked to give the same speech?

(Am.) come about

fetch up (A1) VD1 turn up

ex. (Br.) We all fetched up at the same restaurant by accident.

(Am.) turned up

framed up (B lipass) PPD3 framed

ex. (Br.) He was framed up by the police and was almost put in prison.

(Am.) framed

freeze off (B lipass) VD3 turn off

ex. (Br.) If you treat your clients that way you're going to freeze them off.

(Am.) turn them off.

gabble away (A1) VD1 gab away

ex. (Br.) The women gabbled away without considering the others waiting in line.

(Am.) gabbed away

gen up about/on (A1A3B lipass) VD1 ; PPD1 study up on

ex. (Br.) The visitors had genned up about the project very thoroughly.

(Am.) studied up on

get at5 (A2pass) VD3 harp at

ex. (Br.) She is alway getting at her husband to get a better job.

harping at

get home (A1) VD3 hit home

ex. (Br.) The speech got home all right, and many people were offended.

(Am.) hit home

get into one's stride (A2) VD3 ; PPD3 hit one's stride

ex. (Br.) When the speaker got into his stride, he would go on and on.

(Am.) hit his stride

get off with (A3B3pass) SD2; VD3 hit it off with
 ex. (Br.) He got off with my secretary, something which I wanted to do myself.

(Am.) hit it off with SD2 (Am. get off with=have sex with)

get on! (A1) VD3 go on!

ex. (Br.) Get on! You couldn't have done it all by yourself.

(Am.) Go on!

get on sb's wick (A2) IP/NC get on sb's nerves

ex. (Br.) She gets on my wick with her constant complaining.

(Am.) gets on my nerves

get on to (A3pass) U (contact)

ex. (Br.) If the fire station had been got on to, the house might have been saved.

get out (B 1iipass) VD1 figure out

ex. (Br.) Not a single student could get the problem out.

(Am.) figure the problem out.

get one's rag out (B lii) U (blow your top)

ex. (Br.) There's no need to get your rag out every time I come home late.

get out of it! (A2) PPD1 get off of it!

ex. (Br.) Get out of it! You could never do it.

(Am.) Get off it!

get up8 (B 1ipass) VD3 (U) work up (memorize)

ex. (Br.) It took the actor a long time to get up his Hamlet.

ginger up (B 1ipass) U X

ex. (Br.) The Liberal Party needs gingering up.

give over (A1) U (cut it out)

ex. (Br.) Give over! Can't you see I'm busy now?

give up8 (B 1iipass) PPD3 give up on

IP give up for dead

ex. (Br.) The doctor had given him up, but he recovered.

- (Am.) given up on him/given him up for dead,
- glam up (B lipass) VD2; U (spruced up)
- ex. (Br.) Why are you all glammed up this evening, Alice?
- go down with (A3) VD3 come down with
- ex. (Br.) By Monday, the little boy had gone down with influenza.
- (Am) come down with the flu.
- go for a Burton (A2) IP (be killed)
- ex. (Br.) He had gone for a Burton during the raid.
- go for nothing (A2) IP (go to naught)
- ex. (Br.) All our efforts had gone for nothing.
- go in and out (A1) IP go on and off
- ex. (Br.) The neon lights went in and out.
- (Am) went on and off.
- go off3 (A1) SyD4* go off to sleep
- ex. (Br.) He didn't seem to be able to go off, so he decided to read in bed.
- (Am.) go off to sleep,
- go off the boil (A2) IP (cool down)
- ex. (Br.) The strike movement went off the boil due to a lack of money.
- go off the rails (A2) IP (turn bad)
- ex. (Br.) After she began to take drugs, she went off the rails.
- go on (for) (A1A3) PPD3 go on
- ex. (Br.) He's going on for seventy.
- (Am.) going on seventy
- go on to (A3) PPD3 go on
- ex. (Br.) The workers had to go on to overtime to fill the orders.
- (Am.) go on overtime
- go up to (A1A3) U X/enter

ex. (Br.) He went up to London/Oxford.

grass on (A2pass) VD2; VD3 rat on

ex. (Br.) He told the police he wouldn't grass on his mates.

(Am.) rat on his buddies.

gull out of (B2pass) VD2; VD3 con out of

ex. (Br.) The salesman gulled her out of her life's savings.

(Am.) conned her out of

haul over the coals (B2pass) VD3; IP rake over the coals

ex. (Br.) His father hauled him over the coals for getting poor grades.

(Am.) raked him over the coals

have it away (B liiiB3) PPD1 have it off

ex. (Br.) They were having it away in the back seat of a car.

(Am.) having it off

have a pash on (B2) IP/NC have a crush on

ex. (Br.) She had a pash on the new boy.

(Am.) crush

have the wind up (B liii) IP (be frightened)

ex. (Br.) Every time I get in an airplane I have the wind up.

heave one's heart up (A 1B liii) IP/NC heave one's guts out

ex. (Br.) He drank too much and heaved his heart up.

(Am.) heaved his guts out.

*hiss off the stage (B 1ipass) VD3; IP boo off the stage

ex. (Br.) The actor was terrible and was hissed off the stage.

(Am.) booed off the stage.

hive off (A 1B 1pass) VD2; VD3 (break off)

ex. (Br.) They decided to hive off the profitable routes to a buyer.

*hot up (A1) VD1 heat up

ex. (Br.) Competition is hotting up with the decrease in consumer demand.

(Am.) is heating up

interfere with (A2pass) VD1 meddle with

ex. (Br.) Who's been interfering with my wine?

(Am.) meddling with

jack in (B 1ipass) VD2; VD3 pack in

ex. (Br.) I can't take any more of this work tonight. I'm going to jack it in.

(Am.) pack it in.

jack up (B 1ipass) VD2; VD3 work up

ex. (Br.) Have you got the holiday schedule jacked up yet?

(Am.) worked up

keep one's hair on (B 1ii) IP/NC keep one's shirt on

ex. (Br.) Keep your hair on; I'm coming!

(Am.) shirt on;

keep under (B 1iipass) SyD4 keep under control

ex. (Br.) The army managed to keep the crowd under.

(Am.) keep the crowd under control.

keep one's pecker up (B 1ii) IP/NC hold one's chin up

ex. (Br.) Just keep your pecker up and you'll be all right.

(Am.) hold your chin up

*kick against the pricks (A2) IP X

ex. (Br.) It's no use kicking against the pricks. Eeveryone has to do it.

kid on/up (B 1ii) VD3 put on

ex. (Br.) Don't believe him. He's just kidding you up.

(Am.) putting you on.

kip down (A1) VD1; VD2 bed down

ex. (Br.) He decided to kip down on the floor.

(Am.) bed down

kip out (A1) VD1; VD2 sleep out

ex. (Br.) We kipped out on the beach.

(Am.) slept out on the beach.

kit out (B 1ipass)

VD1

fit out/outfit

ex. (Br.) They kitted themselves out at the mountaineering store.

(Am.) outfitted themselves

knock about with (A1A3)

IP

bum around with

ex. (Br.) You should be more careful who you're knocking about with.

(Am.)

bumming around with.

*knock back (B 1iipass)

VD1

set back

ex. (Br.) That new car must have knocked you back a lot of money.

(Am.)

set you back

knock spots off (B2)

IP

(beat all to hell)

ex. (Br.) Her cooking is good, but mother's would knock spots off it.

(Am.)

beat it all to hell.

knock up2 (B 1ipass)

SD2; VD3

wake up

ex. (Br.) Would you mind knocking me up at seven?

(Am.)

waking me up

knock up5 (B 1iipass)

PPD1

knock out

ex. (Br.) The long climb knocked me up.

(Am.)

knocked me out.

not know one's arse from one's elbow IP

not know one's ass from a
hole in the ground

ex. (Br.) Don't ask John. He doesn't know his arse from his elbow.

(Am.)

doesn't know his ass from a hole in the ground.

- 1) *Semantic and Syntactic Differences Between British and American English in the Construct of Phrasal Verbs*; 人文科学论集第35辑, 63\3\31.